HOUSE OF MIRRORS

Vignettes/Stories:

0) When I was 2 months old, I was sent away for five months to live with foster parents in San Jose (our family was living in Palo Alto); my father visited my once a week and my mother never visited me. When I was seven months old I was returned to my family; for a long time all I did was cry... Why did this happen? Apparently, I was exhibiting strange "symptoms": my limbs would "twitch" when I was bathed. My parents were alarmed and and took me to "experts" at Stanford Hospital to run a series of tests, including an encephalogram; nothing showed up. Nonetheless, the twitching continued and other "experts" (social scientists) were consulted and the consensus was that it would be best to place me in a neutral situation (I guess) where I could be objectively observed. When the objectionable behavior stopped I came home. This was all related to me (and David) about 25 years ago (several years after my father's death) by my mother, very drunk at the time. I was stunned and didn't know what to say.

1) Memory: I'm pushing David on a swing that's set up on our glassed-in (?) porch in our house in Palo Alto; we're 5 or 6 years old. I think I push too hard and David falls off the swing and his arm goes through the glass, shattering it and severely cutting his wrist, leaving a prominent scar. (or did his arm go through a glass door?)

2) When David and I first started masturbating (about 9 years old) we called it "playing our game". Our bedrooms in our house in Los Altos were adjacent and separated by a sliding door, which would be closed at night. Before going to sleep one of us would say loudly to the other: "Are you playing your game?" I achieved (dry) orgasm by rubbing my dick against the sheets; David achieved orgasm by rubbing his dick between his thighs. I called the orgasmic pulsing "ripples".

3) David and I always seemed to share a best friend (until high school). Since I was an introvert and David an extrovert, I always felt a little on the outside (I guess I was jealous). In kindergarten it was Billy, a round-faced pale boy with a butch: a vivid memory is of Billy climbing a tree in the Jungle (the mass of trees and bushes separating our house from next door), sitting on a limb, pulling his pants down and taking a shit. I think Billy moved away when we were in first or second grade.
In fourth grade we lived in Bethesda, MD and our third best friend was Stuart Sheldon, a cute dark-haired Jewish boy (I'm sure I was jealous). We would play war in the skeletal buildings and dirt mounds of unfinished housing projects.
In seventh grade we lived in London and went to a very proper (uniforms, etc.) English "public" (private) school. Our third best friend was Dennis Dragon, the son of Carmen Dragon, the Hollywood composer. Dennis was a bizarre, eccentric curly-haird boy, whose visual antics we found endlessly amusing; Dennis was truly a rebel and a model for us. I had a girlfriend, too, Lillian: she was a pretty, very pale-skinned blonde with budding breasts (a year or so older); we went to Saturday matinees, sitting in the balcony and making out, french kissing and me feeling up her breasts under her blouse.

4) In our freshman year in high school we went to live in Tours, France for a quarter; my father teaching at Stanford-in-France (we were 14). While in Tours David and I became pinball machine fanatics (there were many more of these American-built games in France than in the States at the time, or so it seemed). During a visit to Paris, our family was strolling up the Champs Elysees when David spotted his favorite pinball machine in a cafe. He ran excitedly towards it, not realizing a glass wall separated him from the machine; he went through the glass, which came crashing down, literally slicing his face open. I was in complete shock; our parents, a few hundred feet back, wondered what the commotion was all about. Luckily, a medical school student passing by came to the rescue, holding David's face closed and stemming the blood flow until the ambulance arrived. It was August in Paris and everyone is on vacation; luckily, we found a plastic surgeon to operate on David's face. The whole incident is both vivid and vague (could I have stopped him?). The accident left a prominent scar running the vertical length of his face (thankfully he didn't lose his eye). He was extremely self-conscious when we returned to high school the following fall as sophomores. I wonder whether I felt guilty about now being "better-looking", since we'd started becoming rather competitive (socially and academically). Interestingly, this is about the time when I was aware of my sexual fantasies and attractions moving from girls to boys (could there possibly be a connection?).

5) Growing up as twins (though fraternal), we always had a buddy, which I suppose was beneficial in many ways: we were never lonely and always had a playmate. Our family took several vacations to Europe and the boredom of endless visits to cathedrals and museums was made bearable by our antics: during long drives we would crack each other up with making faces (like Smiley and Judge). On the other hand, our individual identities suffered: we were often known simply as The Twins to our friends and classmates. In high school, we were in almost all the same classes, the "accelerated classes" in each subject. It was during this period that we became more intensely competitive, yet never hostile.

6) In junior and senior year of high school, I began to receive mysterious notes in my locker, all signed by "the class of '51". They were (as I remember) rather elusive in meaning, but definitely homo-erotic in nature. Sometimes I would be told to be somewhere at a certain time; usually I was too nervous to go. Soon I realized other boys were getting these notes, including a boy on the swimming team, Mark, who was a major sexual fantasy. I wish I'd saved these notes.

7) In the spring of my senior year, David and I and several other students attended a "Model U.N." in Berkeley. We'd become friends (and started an alternative newspaper, the "Neo Etudiant") with the brilliant and unconventional Terry McKenna (later notorious as the psylocibin mushroom guru). Terry was a year older and had an apartment in Berkeley where we stayed. One night he turned us on to marijuana for the first time. It was a fabulous experience, except on the bus home the next day I still felt stoned (or something akin to it without the drug). The feeling didn't go away, which very quickly became very scary. I felt as if all I was experiencing was a movie and I was the only one in the audience, very detached, very removed. I tried to "pass", which was quite a struggle; our parents soon caught on that something was amiss and confronted me and David. When asked why I was behaving in such an odd manner, David "confessed" that we'd smoked marijuana in Berkeley; for our parents, that was enough of an

explanation and I was sent to see a psychiatrist (who apparently gave me placebos). The feeling lasted about 10 days or so and then gradually lifted.
However, this experience was repeated several times over the next six months; one of the times was after I'd gotten quite drunk at high school graduation parties. Another time was after viewing Jean Genet's intensely, disturbingly homoerotic film UN CHANT D'AMOUR at Stanford with my father (where was David?). The film had just been re-released after being censored for 15 years and I guess my dad thought it would be an educational, mind-opening experience. Here were men in prison masturbating for the camera and struggling to achieve some sort of emotional/sexual connection and being punished by the voyeuristic guard.

Guggenheim Fellowship Application 2002

MICHAEL WALLIN

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

HOUSE OF MIRRORS will explore aspects of my upbringing that (may) have formed the person I am today. I am a twin: I am gay and my brother is straight. We grew up in a family with a consistent dynamic: an unpredictable, explosive mother dominating a passive and emotionally distant father, who died very suddenly of a heart attack when I was 23. There were traumatic incidents in my life that in retrospect seem powerfully formative: being sent away to live with foster parents from age 2 to 7 months, watching my brother have his face sliced open running through a glass wall when I was 14, experiencing intense psychological breakdowns when I was 18. **HOUSE OF MIRRORS** will investigate these incidents as a search for meaning and an attempt at closure with my past.

The film will be an autobiographical documentary with experimental elements and strongly informed by my second career as a psychotherapist. The film will address certain questions: How does being a twin influence identity formation (psychologically/emotionally) at various stages of development? Is individual identity somehow compromised or merged? How did the above traumatic events affect who I became? How did they affect my relationship with my brother and my parents? Can being gay with a straight twin be a sociological/environmental event versus being predominantly genetic in origin?

To convey the thematic material the film will use several visual strategies. These will form the stylistic and structural elements of **HOUSE OF MIRRORS**:
1/ shots or sequences exerpted from regular-8 home and travel movies (these cover the period of infancy and childhood, a year living and going to school in London, England at age 12, and several summer vacations in Europe), plus some family slides and photos, all resonant of the 50's and early 60's.
2/ short acted vignettes of some of the specific events of my childhood and adolescence; these will be quite stylized, both out of necessity (the past cannot be recreated) and to serve as formal counterpoints to the archival documentary imagery. These sequences will be filmed in simple staged environments with minimal furnishings, unusual lighting and exaggerated camera angles and framing (to avoid documentary realism).
3/ shots and sequences that will convey more metaphorically or symbolically an emotional or psychological "atmosphere" (images of water and nature, images suggesting families or twins, images reflecting a developing gay identity).

There will be several "voices" in **HOUSE OF MIRRORS**:
1/ a poetic narration/voice-over telling specific stories (including the above-mentioned incidents) over images that may directly (such as the home movies) or more suggestively (#3 above) convey intended meanings.
2/ a psychological/psychoanalytic investigation (again as voice-over) that will tread a fine line between presumed "truth" and subtle subversion; I want the film to question the very assumptions it presents and certainly psychology is not an exact science!

HOUSE OF MIRRORS will unfold, tell its story, both in terms of the specific (my story) and the universal. Much of the film will be told in the third person, to give it some degree of remove from standard autobiography and to universalize its implications. Ten years ago I embarked on a second career which is a strong influence on this project: psychotherapy. There are some terms of importance related to both identity formation and family upbringing: "object constancy", "good enough mother" and "mirroring". Fundamentally, they refer to the kind of consistent and empathic nurturing in infancy and childhood leading to the development of a solid versus a fragile self. Did I have these? And what might be the consequence of their absence?

From age 2 to 7 months I was sent away to live with a set of foster parents due to unexplained "twitching" of my limbs, primarily when I was bathed. My father visited me once a week and my mother never visited me. When the objectionable symptoms disappeared I was returned to my family; for a long time after all I did was cry. This was all related to me (and my brother) about 25 years ago (several years after my father's death) by my mother, very drunk at

the time. I was stunned and could say nothing. This incident will be portrayed in **HOUSE OF MIRRORS** with early home movie footage and voice-over.

When I was 14, my father was teaching at Stanford-in-France. During these months, my brother and I had become pinball machine fans/fanatics. On a visit to Paris, strolling up the Champs Elysees, my brother spotted his favorite machine in a cafe, running excitedly towards it, not aware of the plate glass window separating him from the machine. He went through the glass, which came crashing down, literally slicing his face open. I was in complete shock; our parents, a few hundred feet back, wondered what the commotion was all about. The whole incident is both vivid and vague (could I have stopped him?). The accident left a prominent scar running the vertical length of his face. He was extremely self-conscious returning to high school; I wonder if I felt guilty about now being "better-looking". About this time my sexual fantasies and attractions shifted from girls to boys (could there possibly be a connection?). This incident will be dramatically recreated with a series of shots focussing on specific elements: pinball machines, a figure running, glass crashing down, blood spilling, shocked faces. A voice-over will punctuate the stark imagery.

When I was 18, I experienced a series of protracted psychological breakdowns. These seem to have been triggered by (at different points) marijuana, alcohol and the viewing of Jean Genet's film **UN CHANT D'AMOUR**. In my senior year of high school I smoked marijuana for the first time. It was a wonderful experience, but the next day I still felt stoned (or something akin to it without the drug). The feeling didn't go away, which very quickly became very scary. I felt as if all I was experiencing was a movie and I was the only one in the audience, very detached, very removed. My parents sent me to a psychiatrist (who apparently gave me placebos). The feeling lasted about 10 days or so and then gradually lifted, like a veil. The episodes recurred several times over the next 6 months, once after viewing Genet's intense and disturbing film which my father took me to see: here were men in prison struggling to achieve some sort of emotional/sexual connection while being punished by the voyeuristic guard. I later came to understand the state I entered as "depersonalization", an extreme state of anxiety triggered by internal psychological conflict. These incidents will be shown through dramatized recreations of both objective and subjective psychological states, employing camera strategies such as distorted perspectives, soft focus and unnatural framing (without, hopefully, resorting to the visual cliches of the genre!).

Structurally, **HOUSE OF MIRRORS** will unfold primarily chronologically, moving from infancy (home movies, voice-over relating the story of my being sent to live with foster parents), through early childhood (home and travel movies, voice-over relating incidents/memories involving my brother and me) up through adolescence (again, images from home/travel movies, and a voice-over exploring my first inklings of being gay and how that affected my relationship with my brother). This section of the film will also include re-enactments/dramatizations of my brother's accident and the psychological breakdowns I experienced. However, the film will not follow a straight line, timewise (which would be too predictable). There will be places where the chronology will be interrupted: these will include what I call the "metaphorical" or "symbolic" images I will be shooting for the film, and a narration which will be more detached or removed from the/my specific story, i.e., more broadly psychological or psychoanalytic in nature (referring to some of the concepts/questions re: identity development mentioned above).

HOUSE OF MIRRORS will be shot in 16mm color negative: this choice (versus digital video) reflects my intention to preserve the delicate nature of the color, light and texture of the archival footage. The film will be 26 minutes: I want the work to be concise, economical and tightly edited, and to in a sense ask more questions than it provides answers. This short format has other advantages, among them my belief that "less is more" in visual media and that, particularly with personal archival footage, too much of the same can lose a viewer's interest.

HOUSE OF MIRRORS will be a film that speaks to a broad and sophisticated audience. I believe that people are hungry to find aspects of themselves in media art, and that this can best be accomplished by presenting the personal and extracting from this the universal. We all grow up in families that are flawed in one way or another, provide the opportunities to become the unique individuals we are. With its interlocking themes of growing up gay and a twin, my family dynamics and psychological identity formation, **HOUSE OF MIRRORS** will give viewers space to "plug themselves into" and engage with the work on many levels: as a twin, as gay and of course as a member of their particular family.

Guggenheim Fellowship Application 2002

Project Summary: Michael Wallin

My film, **HOUSE OF MIRRORS**, will explore aspects of my growing up that (may) have formed the person I am today. These include the facts of being a twin and realizing at age fourteen that I was gay. Equally important was the family dynamic: an unpredictable, explosive mother dominating a passive, emotionally distant father who died very suddenly when I was twenty-three. More generally, how does being a twin influence identity formation in various stages (age-wise)psychologically and emotionally? Is individual identity compromised or somehow merged?

Eight years ago I embarked on a second career that is a strong influence on this project: psychotherapy. There are some terms of importance related to both my identity and my family upbringing: "object constancy", "good enough mother" and "mirroring". Fundamentally, they refer to the kind of consistent and empathic nurturing in infancy and childhood leading to the development of a solid versus a fragile self. Did I have these? And what might be the consequence of their absence?

From age two months to seven months I was sent to live with a set of foster parents due to unexplained "twitching" of my limbs. I learned about this family secret several years after my father's death. When I was fourteen, living in France with my family, my twin brother ran through a plate glass window on the Champs Elysees in Paris in pursuit of a pinball machine. His face was sliced open. When I was eighteen, I experienced a series of brief psychological breakdowns, triggered by marijuana, alcohol, and the viewing of Jean Genet's homoerotic film **UN CHANT D'AMOUR.**

How did these traumatic events affect the person I am today? I have no answers but I would like to explore the possibilities in my film. Again, more generally, how does trauma (versus more consistent but less severe deficits in identity development) impact psychological/emotional growth. Bracketing (and as background to) these experiences was exposure to a variety of progressive cultural and political events in the turbulent sixties. How many versions can there be of a person's life? My own, my brother's, my mother's, my father's which I'll never know...it was a house of many mirrors.

My exploration will include excerpts from 8mm home and travel movies (I was the designated cameraman), plus family photos and slides resonant of the fifties and early sixties. I would like to tell my story primarily in the third person, to give it some degree of remove from standard autobiography and to universalize its implications.

There will be several "voices" in the film: 1) a poetic narration telling stories (including the above incidents) over images that may directly (such as the home movies) or more metaphorically (new footage I will shoot) convey intended meanings; 2) a psychoanalytic investigation that will walk the line between presumed truth and subtle subversion; 3) short acted vignettes of specific events in my childhood and adolescence, as stylistic counterpoint to the more documentary and poetic imagery. **HOUSE OF MIRRORS** will be a 16mm color/sound film thirty minutes in length.

California Arts Counsil: Artists Fellowship Program

Artist's Statement: Michael Wallin

I see myself as a mid-career artist making films in the long tradition of the experimental filmmaker. When I began, I investigated more universal themes (e.g., spirituality, landscape) using experimental techniques, followed by a fascination with those techniques themselves. As well, I made a film (THE PLACE BETWEEN OUR BODIES) that was groundbreaking in its frank depiction of gay sexuality. DECODINGS and BLACK SHEEP BOY again deal with personal subject matter, but from a more reflective position. This is my approach toward my art, giving space for the viewers to reflect and find themselves in the work. DECODINGS did this via found footage, BLACK SHEEP BOY via a poetic voice-over that suggested, rather than determined, how the images might be read. HOUSE OF MIRRORS (my current project, for which I've received a grant from the San Francisco Arts Commission) will continue this evolution in my art-making, attempting to find the universal in the particular, giving room to the viewer to make meaning for themselves, with the clues that the film provides.

I see myself growing as an artist in several ways. One goal is to continue with each project refining my filmmaking methods in order to reach an ideal unity of form and style with theme and content. I would like to come to the point where I could express my feelings and ideas as a film artist in the most effective and economical way as possible. As well, an artistic goal for me is to reach an increasingly large audience through my work without compromising my artistic philosophy. I think this can be achieved with a delicate balance between giving and withholding, as it were, or finding that place where artist meets audience where understanding and appreciation can be experienced without manipulation.

Generally, my films have reached an audience that might be described as relatively sophisticated viewers of independent, experimental film. When my work has had (as with THE PLACE... or my last two films) a more defined gay content, the audience has grown to include a broad section of gay/lesbian viewers who might be less familiar with experimental work. With HOUSE OF MIRRORS, my goal is to address both these groups (of course there is a place where they overlap). As well, my hope is that the audience could be enlarged to include viewers who might be drawn to a work of somewhat greater accessibility that weaves more traditional documentary forms into an experimental piece.